

How emotion trumps rationality in the world of Trump

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Body

Facebook's algorithms are at last a trending topic, identified as a game-changer of public opinion and hence in politics and elections. Why do algorithms and the microtargeting strategies of companies such as Cambridge Analytica work so effectively?

The elephant in the room is the role of emotion in contemporary politics. While marketing, advertising, cognitive and behaviour psychology, and neuroscience - have kept up with studies of emotion and affect, the humanities and social sciences have been asleep at the wheel.

Still crushed under the pressure of Enlightenment conceptions of "Rational Man," scholars have focused on evermore intricate debates about rationality, at the expense of developing more nuanced understandings of how emotion shapes behaviours, subjectivity and politics.

As a result, society is not benefitting from research into how emotions are abused for the sake of profit or ideology, while social-media giants and other purveyors of spectacle profit handsomely.

Microtargeting operates by directing advertising and other influential messages at individuals on the basis of "psychometrics" - user profiles extracted from personal data collected through their various "public" social-media activities.

News reports allege that Donald Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner, received a crash course in Facebook's marketing strategies when the Trump campaign realized it could use social media to target susceptible, undecided voters in order to sway the election. There is evidence, for example, that African-American voters were targeted with a message stating "Hillary thinks black people are superpredators," designed to anger undecided voters and sway Clinton supporters to vote Trump, or stay home.

In addition to microtargeting that squashes public debate, another emotional aim of disinformation campaigns is to create emotional confusion and information anarchy, producing so much (dis)information that citizens become apathetic and opt out of news media altogether.

The emotional nature of contemporary politics and information is captured by the 2016 Word of the Year, "post-truth." In 2016, there was a 2,000-per-cent increase in the frequency of its usage. Post-truth is defined as "circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief."

Post-truth arose to describe the emotional aims of the Brexit campaign, which sidestepped reason and went for the emotional jugular, tapping into the feeling of truth, or what sociologist Arlie Hochschild calls "deep stories" - for example, powerful emotions of fear and anger catalyzed by perceptions of economic loss.

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Of course, emotion has always been targeted by propaganda. In ancient Greece, Aristotle emphasized emotion centrally in his analysis of the power of rhetoric. The father of modern propaganda, Edward Bernays, founded much of today's dangerous proficiency at manipulating emotion in the wake of modern mass communications technologies of the 1920s.

On a funnier note, Stephen Colbert also recognized the emergence of "post-truth" a decade ago, in 2005, when he popularized truthiness: "The belief in what you feel to be true, rather than in what the facts support."

Two recent studies reported in popular press reveal scholarly attempts to understand the \$1-million question of how affect works at a collective (rather than only individual) level.

As reported in the New York Times, NYU psychologists studied how "moral emotional language" moves more readily through Twitter than other kinds of emotion. European psychologists claim to have identified "Factor X" - a measure of a collective zeitgeist of "doom and gloom" - that influences voting decisions and accounts in part for the rise of populism and the extreme-right.

Although news media fancies itself "objective" we are unlikely to see an end to emotionality driving information, since traditional and social media profit handsomely from creating mediatized spectacles.

A polarized populace - extreme differences of opinions between the right and left - makes for good drama, as we witness in media coverage of "both sides," in response to what should be intolerable - white supremacy, dramas over the national anthem, or whether or not recent weather disasters result from climate change.

We have hit an impasse in understanding by adhering to the Holy Grail of human subjects as reasonable creatures. The fact that we are fundamentally influenced by our emotions and by collective affect (or "zeitgeist") is slowly being recognized across disciplines in what is known as the "emotional" or "affective" turn in the humanities and social sciences.

It is high time that scholars catch up with more nefarious uses of emotion research. We urgently need to understand our emotional and affective relationships to social media - and to knowledge itself - before Zuckerberg's Facebook Frankenstein entirely reprograms humanity.

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